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Mineta Urges House Panel on Fuel Standards

By [JOHN O'NEIL](#)

Transportation Secretary [Norman Y. Mineta](#) asked the House Energy and Commerce Committee today for the authority to revamp the system of fuel economy standards for cars, while Democrats insisted that President Bush could move immediately to require more efficient cars if he wanted.

Mr. Mineta acknowledged that the administration does have the right to "set the stringency of the CAFE standard," using the abbreviation for corporate average fuel economy. But he said the system should be changed more broadly.

"What we need is the statutory ability to reform the structure of the program," he said, to avoid problems with the current system. Those problems, he said, have hurt American automakers and endangered safety by forcing manufacturers to make more small cars.

Mr. Mineta said the system should be revamped to set different fuel standards for different sizes of vehicles.

Democrats said the proposal was meant to give the appearance of action on gas prices without actually changing policy. Representative Jan Schakowsky of Illinois called it part of President Bush's "public relations campaign to distance the administration from oil and gas companies" at a time of widespread public anger.

Mr. Mineta said that revamping the fuel economy process was "an important step toward reducing American oil demand," but he acknowledged that it was unlikely that new rules could be ready within a year, in time to affect vehicles sold in the fall of 2008.

"Our proposal on CAFE standards is not a short-term response" to high energy costs, he said.

Mr. Mineta also said the administration had no specific target for fuel economy in mind, declining a call by Representative Edward J. Markey, Democrat of Massachusetts, to support a bipartisan bill calling for a standard of an average 33 miles per gallon, up from the current 27.5.

Quick action by President Bush to adopt that standard would drive down gas prices by showing oil speculators that the United States was serious about conservation, Mr. Markey said.

Mr. Mineta replied, "It seems to me that approach is ready, fire, aim."

The hearing came in a week when the recent spike in gasoline prices moved to the forefront of Congressional action. As the Senate continued to work on a bill seeking to give consumers some relief, the House planned to take up two measures this afternoon, one to make price-gouging by oil companies a federal offense and one to speed the approval of new refineries.

The political shifts that have been caused by mounting public anger over high gasoline prices were in evidence in today's hearing, to the amusement of many Democrats.

"This hearing does have something of a twilight zone feeling to it," said Representative Jay Inslee, Democrat of Washington. Republicans in Congress repeatedly voted to block President Clinton from exercising authority to change CAFE standards, he said, President Bush "fought tooth and nail" to block increases in automobile efficiency.

Other Democrats said the request for new authority was a charade. "The president ought to just do it," said [Representative Henry A. Waxman](#), Democrat of California.

Republicans on the committee, many of whom voted against proposals to raise fuel economy standards as recently as last year, acknowledged that the emphasis on conservation represented a change, but called as well for efforts to increase drilling and exploration for new oil supplies.

"Maybe we are latecomers on to the debate on CAFE," said Representative Nathan Deal, Republican of Georgia. "I hope that some of our friends on the other side of the aisle would also be newly willing to accept our arguments about the need for new supply."

And the forces that have blocked changes in the standards for passenger cars, first set in 1975, were in evidence as well, as Representative Marsha Blackburn, Republican of Tennessee, predicted a "nasty little debate" over the issue.

Lawmakers of both parties with automobile factories in their districts expressed deep concern about changing the fuel economy system, although manufacturers have expressed support for a size-based approach. "The last thing we want to do is take another hit on a United States manufacturing capability," said Representative Joe Barton, the Texas Republican who is the panel's chairman.

Representative John Dingell of Detroit, the committee's senior Democrat, said an increase in fuel economy standards could take 10 to 15 years to translate into significant savings in fuel, as vehicles built under the current standards drop out of the automotive fleet.

On the other hand, there is growing support in Congress for action to curb gasoline use, and the first witness today was Representative Sherwood Boehlert of New York, who is a leader of the small group of House Republicans who have called for greater conservation.

Mr. Boehlert, who is a co-sponsor with Mr. Markey of the bill to raise the fuel standards for cars to 33 miles a gallon, called Mr. Mineta's proposal "a largely symbolic action."

"If we give the administration this authority we know what will happen," he said. "We'll get a long rule-making process that likely will produce a tepid result."

Mr. Mineta said the new approach would resemble that used to draft new fuel economy standards for light trucks that took effect earlier this month. Rather than set a single standard for all light trucks — a system that rewards the building of lighter vehicles — the rules divided light trucks into different categories based on their size, or "footprint," with different requirements for each.

Environmental groups have criticized the truck rules, saying they will lead to a minuscule improvement in efficiency.